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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Soviet Stakes in the Indo-Pakistani Crisis

Summary

The USSR's preference is for a stable subcontinent. In the Soviet view, only China or the West--most likely the former--would profit from renewed Indo-Pakistani hostilities. In the present crisis, Moscow has sought to restrain both sides from taking actions that would exacerbate tensions. Moscow's efforts with the Pakistanis have had little visible effect, but the Soviets probably do deserve some credit for the restraint that India has shown thus far.

Indian Foreign Minister Singh's visit to Moscow in early June alerted the Soviets to India's growing frustration over the refugee problem. In their efforts to soothe the Indians, however, the Soviets may have unwittingly given Singh some inflated ideas on the extent to which Moscow is willing to support India against Pakistan. Consequently, the Soviets may find it necessary before too long to disabuse the Indians of the notion that Moscow would approve any overt Indian military move into East Pakistan.

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1. The Soviets were slow to recognize the crisis that developed in Pakistan early this year. After the Tashkent Conference in early 1966, Soviet leaders had devoted considerable time and attention to making sure that the agreement signed then did not come undone. In the years immediately after Tashkent, at virtually every high-level meeting with Indian and Pakistani leaders the Soviets encouraged the two countries to work toward better relations. Moscow acted not only out of its concern to protect its achievements at Tashkent but also out of the realization that internecine squabbling on the subcontinent worked mainly to China's advantage and hampered Moscow's own efforts to improve its position there.

2. One of the consequences of the first armed clashes on the Sino-Soviet border in March 1969, not surprisingly, was a renewed Soviet effort to lessen tensions on the subcontinent. In May 1969, Soviet Premier Kosygin made three separate trips to South Asia, only one of which had been long-planned. Although the main purpose of the visits was to line up the governments of India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan on the USSR's side in the dispute with China, Kosygin also used the occasion to lobby for renewed efforts toward regional economic cooperation. This and other Soviet attempts to shore up their position in Asia (e.g., Brezhnev's proposal for a system of collective security in Asia) brought only mixed results, and Soviet leaders soon turned their attention elsewhere. Throughout 1970 and early 1971, the leadership focused most of its attention on developments in Europe and the Middle East and preparations for the 24th Party Congress.

3. In part because of Moscow's preoccupation with developments elsewhere, Soviet policy in the present crisis has been largely reactive. When Moscow realized in late March that Pakistani President Yahya was going to fail in his efforts to achieve some sort of peaceful political accommodation with the East Pakistanis, the Soviet Consul General in Dacca met with Yahya to urge moderation. Once the fighting began, the Soviets lost no time

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in trying to get it stopped. Soviet Premier Kosygin and President Podgorny both sent personal messages to Yahya asking him to seek a peaceful solution of his differences with the East Pakistani leadership, though only Podgorny's representation was ever made public.

4. Podgorny's appeal on 3 April was probably designed to serve several purposes. For one thing, Moscow probably hoped that it would help assuage the Indians, who had made widespread appeals to the international community to do something to halt the bloodshed. In addition, the Soviets probably also hoped that the publication of the message would bring additional pressures on the West Pakistanis to stop fighting. The obvious sympathy for the plight of the East Pakistanis that was conveyed by the message suggests it was worded with an eye to the East Pakistanis as well as the Indians. The Soviets do not welcome the breakup of Pakistan; but neither do they approve of the decimation of the only moderate political force there--the Awami League. Its destruction could only reinforce the more extreme radical groups in East Pakistan, and the Soviets fear that over the longer term, this would redound to Peking's benefit.


5. In the next two months, Moscow confined itself to behind-the-scenes efforts to defuse the crisis. Once it had become clear that the East Pakistanis were not going to be able to mount an effective resistance to West Pakistani forces immediately, the Soviets backed off a bit and tried to repair the strains Podgorny's statement had caused on its relations with West Pakistan. They told the Pakistanis they deplored the bloodshed and still thought Yahya ought to resolve his differences with the East Pakistanis peacefully. They also said, however, that the USSR continued to support a unified Pakistan and did not intend to take sides in the dispute. This line was further espoused in Soviet propaganda that denied any intention of interfering in Pakistan's internal affairs.

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6. Moscow's desire to preserve its "special relationship" with the Indians prompted it to take a somewhat different line in New Delhi, but the objective of Soviet policy remained the same. There the Soviets professed sympathy for the East Pakistani cause and general--though noncommittal--concurrence with India's view that the concept of a unified Pakistan had been rent beyond repair and that the emergence of an independent East Pakistan was inevitable. When the Bangla Desh government was established in mid-April, however, the Soviets were the first to caution against premature Indian recognition of the new government, advising instead that India allow "other countries" to take the lead. (No other country has yet been so inclined, a factor that Moscow doubtless anticipated.)

8. Moscow also offered immediate assistance to India to help cope with the influx of refugees, but the problem soon grew to such enormous proportions that the Soviet contribution seemed a mere pittance. It was not until Indian Foreign Minister Singh visited Moscow in early June that Moscow really focused in on the dangers inherent in the refugee problem. Concerned over the mounting tensions in Indo-Pakistani relations and desirous of assuaging the Indians, the USSR again decided to speak out critically about West Pakistan's handling of the situation in the East. In the communiqué issued at the end of Singh's visit on 8 June, the Soviets and the Indians called for "immediate measures" to stop the flow of refugees from East Pakistan and the creation of proper conditions so that

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the refugees could return home safely. In his election speech on 9 June, Kosygin also devoted considerable attention to the situation on the subcontinent. He specifically referred to the "tensions mounting in Indo-Pakistani relations" as a result of the refugee problem and again appealed to West Pakistan to take the necessary steps to solve the refugee problem.



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12. Moscow's response was apparently greeted equally favorably in New Delhi,

whatever the nature of the assurances Moscow gave to Singh, it is very unlikely that the USSR intended them to be taken as an indication of Soviet support for Indian military action against East Pakistan. Moscow's behavior vis-a-vis the Pakistanis suggests that the Soviets have not given up hope that Yahya will ultimately be able to achieve some sort of modus vivendi with the East Pakistanis.

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Although these Soviet statements are undoubtedly exaggerated for their effect in Pakistan, they presumably reflect the other side of the more balanced impression the Soviets may have expected Singh to take away.

The Future

13. Prime Minister Gandhi has stated that India would not take "an adventurous step" against Pakistan. Upper echelon Indian military leaders, including Army Chief Manekshaw, advise against a military move into East Pakistan, not because they doubt their ability to wage a successful campaign,

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but because they fear that the Pakistanis would attack from the west and the Chinese would intervene in the north--presenting an undesirable three-front war. If a war is to be fought, however, the military have indicated that they would prefer to fight in the fall, when the monsoon rains will have stopped and transportation will be easier.

25X1 14. Pressures on the Indian Government to take "unilateral action" against East Pakistan are mounting.

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They believe that the international community would do little more than criticize India for initiating hostilities and that the Chinese, while they would probably support Pakistan with military equipment, would not commit troops. The "young Turks" in Mrs. Gandhi's Ruling Congress Party are also taking an increasingly hard line toward Pakistan, and the opposition politicians and a growing number of influential editorial writers are recommending recognition of "Bangla Desh" and, if necessary, unilateral action.

15. Mrs. Gandhi has taken a number of political steps--including the passage of an internal security act and the imposition of "President's Rule" in West Bengal--in recent weeks that could facilitate a unilateral move into East Pakistan. None of these seems as important, however, as her attempt to line up Soviet support.

16. We cannot be certain how Moscow will field her formal request, but judging from past performance it is likely that the Soviets will attempt to dissuade the Indians from taking direct military action.

17. Moscow would in any case be likely to take issue with those Indians who argue that the Chinese would not intervene. The Soviets could point to Chinese statements on behalf of the West Pakistanis and to the increased economic and military assistance that China has provided to Pakistan since the outset of the crisis to argue that such an estimate is by no

means a foregone conclusion. They could point out that even if Chinese troops do not actually cross the border, they may make threatening military moves (as they did during the Indo-Pakistani crisis over Kashmir in 1965) that would tie down large numbers of Indian troops on the Sino-Indian border. The Soviets could argue that a military move into East Pakistan, therefore, would be sheer adventurism and one that Moscow could not support.

18. Moscow might also suggest that the time is not yet ripe for such a move and that a combination of military and political actions might better accomplish the same goals. The Soviets may counter-propose that the Indians continue their efforts to strengthen the East Bengali liberation forces--Moscow may even agree to supply the necessary materiel for this purpose--until such a time as these forces themselves are strong enough to carve out a hunk of East Pakistani territory. In the interim, Moscow might promise to increase diplomatic and economic pressures on the West Pakistanis to persuade them to come to some form of accommodation with the Awami League. The Soviets might also undertake to give greater diplomatic support to efforts by "Bangla Desh" to achieve international recognition and to provide India with additional economic assistance to help in coping with the refugee influx.

19. The danger, however, is that what the Soviets eventually tell the Indians may not be sufficient to discourage them. Indian policy toward Pakistan will ultimately be determined by a host of complex and often contradictory considerations. Only a clearcut Soviet threat to cease all military and economic aid in the event India moves militarily against East Pakistan will have a good chance to deter Indian policymakers. At present, the Soviet leaders seem to feel that, barring an unexpected worsening of the situation, there will be sufficient time to make clear to the Indians that Moscow's overriding interest is to prevent the chaos that might result from wider hostilities.